# Science or Philosophy?: Jon Elster and John Searle

As the name suggests, the social sciences have often seen themselves as an analogue or extension of the natural sciences and have from the beginning aspired to their successes. Like many who want to duplicate success they do not understand, social sciences has been obsessed with duplicating the *form* of the natural sciences and not its motivations. Just as rival music player manufacturers have tried to copy the look of the iPod without understanding why it takes that look, the social sciences have copied the structure of the natural sciences without understanding why they take that structure.

The greatest success of the natural sciences is undoubtedly the laws of physics. Here, an handful of simple equations can accurately predict the motion of a vast variety of everyday objects under common actions. Seeing this, social scientists have aspired to derive similar laws that predict the behavior of whole societies. (Others, meanwhile insist the entire project is impossible because the society will respond to the creation of the law, making the law invalid — reflexivity.)

But reflection upon the history of the natural sciences will see that this notion is insane. Physics did not develop thru attempts to discover the laws that explained all of motion. Instead, various kinds of motion (like falling objects) were described, rules for their behavior deduced, and commonalities in those rules discovered. Eventually it was the case that the commonalities were so great and the rules so few that a handful of laws could explain most of the phenomena, but this assumption was not made *a priori*.

Jon Elster argues that the social sciences should proceed in a similar way: various social phenomena should be described, the mechanisms that give rise to them explained, and the commonalities among mechanisms discovered. Most of his work consists of practicing social science in this way, with a few attempts at laying out a toolbox of these common mechanisms.

Modern social science is so split between attempts at grand law-like theories and modest essays of careful description that Elster's third way seems alien and hard to comprehend. But there is a clear model that social scientists can look to: analytical philosophy.

Analytical philosophers do not take as their task grand law-like explanations for the world. Instead, they set upon a particular piece of conception — language, free will, ethics — and try to discover its logical structure. In doing so they often develop tools they shared in common with other philosophical projects.

This similarity can perhaps be best seen in the work of the man who is Jon Elster's closest equivalent in the world of analytical philosophy, John Searle. In his career, Searle has addressed a number of topics: language, intentionality, consciousness, social reality, and rationality. Throughout he has taken has his task providing a clear description of the phenomena and explaining the pieces it consists of. And in explaining those pieces, he frequently develops tools that he reuses in his other explanations.

Take the notion of *direction of fit*. Searle argues that all statements have a direction of fit, which can be either up, down, both, or null. If we imagine (by convention) that statements float above the world pointing down at the things they represent, then statements like "John and Jill are married", in which it is the job of the statement to change to accurately represent the world, have a downward direction of fit. By contrast, statements like "I want to marry him", in which it is the world must change to match the statement, have an upward direction of fit.

This notion, which Searle and Austin developed for describing language, Searle later reused for describing mental states. Love, for example, has an upward direction of fit, belief downward, and joy null. And in my own everyday life, I have found the same tool useful in thinking about various phenomena I've encountered.

Social scientists don't seem to read much philosophy. I suspect most of them see it as an alien culture consisting of, [as Paul Graham put it](#), "either highly technical stuff that doesn't matter much, or vague concatenations of abstractions their own authors didn't fully understand." But perhaps they should, because even if the technical stuff lacks interest (and considering some of the topics involved, I'm skeptical that this is always the case), the tools, and the way they're wielded, should be a lesson.

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